



## **Public participation in naming decisions**

### **Advantages and problems identified in Denmark and Norway**

Gammeltoft, Peder

*Published in:*  
Place Names to the Public. International Workshop on Toponymy

*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Document license:*  
[Unspecified](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Gammeltoft, P. (2015). Public participation in naming decisions: Advantages and problems identified in Denmark and Norway. In *Place Names to the Public. International Workshop on Toponymy: Thursday, October 8 to Saturday, October 10 2015. International Convention center Jeju, Jeju 63547, Korea* (pp. 45-50).

# Public participation in naming decisions

## – advantages and problems identified in Denmark and Norway

---

*Peder Gammeltoft*

### **Abstract:**

This presentation explores how differences in regulations in geographical naming between Denmark and Norway affects the way in which public participation takes place in naming decisions. Where decisions in Norway are made with the backing of a Place-Names Act, the same decisions are taken in Denmark on the basis of a Departmental Order. The Norwegian Place-Names Act also covers a greater array of geographical name types than the Danish regulations. Thus, Norwegian naming decisions are much stronger in effect and wider in application – and, thus, is public participation greater, as the number of complaints in naming decisions in Norway outnumber those in Denmark by a factor ten or more. On the other hand, Denmark restricts public participation to a greater extent than Norway.

---

Although Denmark and Norway have a long history in common and share the same Scandinavian ideology of the social-democratic welfare state, there are considerable differences in how the two countries go about regulating the individual's say in the nation's daily life and decisions for the future. A prime example of this is the two countries' attitudes towards public participation in geographical naming decisions, where Denmark has a relatively restrictive attitude to public participation and Norway almost the completely opposite.

### **Geographical naming regulations and implementations in Denmark and Norway**

The Danish Place-Names Commission (Stednavneudvalget) was established in 1910 in order to secure a correct and uniform spelling of geographical names throughout the state system. Thus, the Place-Names Commission acts as the national authority on geographical names. This group of experts works in cooperation with local municipalities on the revision of geographical names in the published lists of authorized place-names and an online service [www.stednavne.info](http://www.stednavne.info), administered by the Danish Place-

Names Commission. The authorisation process proceeds via the Place-Names Commission recommendations of authorisation to the Minister of Cultural Affairs who then makes the final ruling in the matter. The guidelines for standardisation of geographical names in Denmark have been given in departmental orders of 1978 and 1997.<sup>1</sup> Any changes, amendments and revisions in authorisation are kept up-to-date by the Danish Geodata Agency (Geodatastyrelsen).

For Norway, on the other hand, geographical names are protected by the Place-Names Act (Lov om stadnamn).<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the Place-Names Act is to take care of place-names as spoken cultural heritage and provide them with a convenient written form, and actively work for the knowledge of and use, nationally and internationally, of Norwegian geographical names. As the national authority the Norwegian Mapping and Cadastre Authority (Statens kartverk) is in charge of standardisation of geographical names in Norway, whereas the authorisation of geographical names is taken care of by place-name consultants administered through the Norwegian Language Council (Språkrådet). The place-name consultants work with geographical names in Norwegian, Kven and Saami (North Saami, South Saami and Lule Saami). Authorised geographical names are stored in a central place-name database (Sentralt stedsnavneregister (SSR)) maintained by Norwegian Mapping and Cadastre Authority.

Not only is there a difference in how secure the standardisation and authorisation is between Denmark and Norway – Denmark acts from departmental orders, Norway acts on the basis of a law – there are also differences in what receives authorisation. In Denmark it is only names of places of relevance to the central administration that are authorized. In general this means that cities, towns, villages and sizable farms, large natural features (forests, heathland, etc.) as well as administrative units like region, commune and parish receive authorisation, whereas houses, smallholdings and ordinary farms do not. In Norway, the level of authorisation goes much further to include also the names of single farms and smallholdings. In numbers,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=73300&exp=1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1990-05-18-11>; <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2007-06-01-592>.

this difference means that there are in excess of 100,000 geographical names authorized in Norway, whereas it is only a quarter of this number, about 25,000, in Denmark.

### **How does the public view the concept of standardisation and authorisation?**

It goes without saying that the Norwegian authorisation body, the place-name consultants, and the standardising body, the Norwegian Mapping and Cadastre Authority, have a lot more contact to individuals than the Danish Place-Names Commission, owing to the fact that Norway has four times as many geographical names authorized. However, the view of the two countries standardisation and authorisation bodies could hardly be further apart from each other. In general, Danish authorisations go through without any serious objections, whereas similar Norwegian decisions are often met with considerable local protests. Why is this so?

Some of the reason has to do with differences in the size of geographical names being authorized. By going down to the level of farms and smallholdings, then the case is often between an individual, with his or her own mind and idea of how to spell 'their' geographical name, something I shall return to later in this paper. Another major reason is the fact that Denmark asks individuals proposing or suggesting certain spellings for geographical names to have the spelling suggestion cleared with the local community, by letting the suggestion be discussed by the local commune, who then asks the Place-Names Commission to authorize the geographical name in question for them.

This procedure – as well as the practice of authorisation – has done that there are 0-2 complaints a year in Denmark over decisions made by the Danish Place-Names Commission. In Norway, the number range from 8-20 yearly complaints in recent years.<sup>3</sup> It should be said, however, that the number has decreased drastically in recent years, as the number of complaints used to tally between 30 and 80 cases every year.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Nytt om namn. Meldingsblad for Norsk namnelag*, nos. 59/60 (2014), pp. 8-9; *Nytt om namn. Meldingsblad for Norsk namnelag*, no. 57 (2013), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Nytt om namn. Meldingsblad for Norsk namnelag*, no. 41 (2005), pp. 14-19; *Nytt om namn. Meldingsblad for Norsk namnelag*, no. 35 (2002), pp. 6-7.

Whereas this drastic drop in cases to some extent relies on changes in procedures – i.e. some lenience in the interpretation of the letter of the law, some of the reason must also be sought in the anticipation of a change in the Norwegian Place-Names Act, which has been underway since 2009.

The Danish complaints virtually always concern spelling of villages and towns, whereas the Norwegian complaints usually concern smallholdings and single farms. From August 2001-July 2002, there were 33 complaints submitted to the Complaints Board for Place-Name Decisions (Klagenemnda for stadnamnsaker). Of the 33 complaints, 27 concerned smallholdings, five nature names and one a smallholding and nature name combined. In excess of 80% of the complaints concerned smallholdings – and in almost two-thirds of the cases the complainer was the smallholding-owner himself/herself.

This probably explains why public complaints are so rare in Denmark – geographical names are not authorised at level where the authorised name is seen to encroach on private ownership (i.e. smallholdings and field names, local nature names, etc.). The differences between Denmark and Norway are thus considerable when it comes to public participation in naming decisions. In Norway, there are very vivid discussions on how to authorise geographical names and authorisations made are often contested by the local users. The result is an increased awareness of geographical names and naming of geographical localities. In comparison, the Danish Place-Names Commission lives in almost Sleeping Beauty slumber, with few cases for authorisation every year and little to complain about from the public. Here, the result is almost complete unawareness of the existence of a body such as the Place-Names Commission.

### **Public engagement in the formulation of place-name regulations**

But let us return to Norway. What was the nature of the complaints? When one dives into the cases, it becomes evident that the complaints do not concern mere spelling concerns. At the base of the question is ‘ownership’ of the name. Almost two thirds Norwegian surnames are derived from geographical names, usually either settlements or natural features. This surname situation is probably unique in a European context, and to some extent, it is possible to see Norwegian surnames carry the Norwegian landscape and

settlement history through their surnames. In such cases where the surname of a smallholder and the name of his property are the same, it goes without saying that there may be a wish for similarity in spelling.

And this is where the problem arises. The bulk of the Norwegian surname stock was formed when Norway was still part of the Dano-Norwegian Double Monarchy. Norway's role in this constellation was, however, far from as equal as the name states – in many ways Norway was relegated to being a colony under Denmark. Norwegian thus only existed in speech and all written language was done in the Danish of the day. Thus, a large part of the Norwegian surnames derived from geographical names have spellings which have been written down by Danish officials in the centuries before Norway gained its political and linguistic independence. Thus a settlement name *Vik* 'bay' can be represented as the surname *Wik*, *Wig*, *Wiig*, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Geographical names and surnames are regulated by separate laws: The farm name *Vik* is in accordance with the place names regulations; and the surname *Wiig* is written according to its tradition as surname. The cause for conflict arises when a person who carries the surname *Wiig* wants that particular spelling to be reflected in the name of the smallholding he/she lives on. The core of the conflict is reflected in the views of Ole Anton Hoel from Østre Toten in Norway, who fought a long battle for changing the spelling of his farm from the authorised – and in accordance with Norwegian spelling – *Hol* to the form *Hoel* of his surname. He felt so ill-treated by the authorities that he started *Navnebeskyttelsen Norge* (Name Protection Norway) and took his complaint to the national politicians.

His views got political support and was followed up through a recommendation by the national assembly some years ago, that owners of single farms and smallholdings should be given the right to decide on the spelling of names of their single holdings. This recommendation was this year turned into an amendment to the Place-Names Act<sup>6</sup> from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, following a change of government to a

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Helleland, Botolv: *The conflict of official and private spelling of place names*, W.P.68/16, 28<sup>th</sup> UNGEGN Session: [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/28th-gegn-docs/WP/WP68\\_28%20Ungegn%202014%20W.P.%20The%20conflict%20of%20official%20and%20private%20spelling%20of%20place%20names.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/28th-gegn-docs/WP/WP68_28%20Ungegn%202014%20W.P.%20The%20conflict%20of%20official%20and%20private%20spelling%20of%20place%20names.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/lov/2015-06-19-74>

conservative-nationalist coalition. The amendment will probably result in a greater number of inconsistencies between the spelling of the names of single holdings and the same name used for larger entities – i.e. the farm of *Hoel* will be situated in the centre of the township of *Hol*. The danger is that Norway will see a double onomastic system, or divide, where most of the place names will be consistent with current spelling rules, apart from the names of single holdings which may be a way reflecting Danish baroque period spelling. Considering the usual Norwegian complaints about Danish Dominance – their ‘400-year night’, it is ironic that the onomastic landscape of Norway may yet again see reflections of this ‘dark’ period of Norwegian history, destroying a consistency of geographical names spelling rarely seen elsewhere in the world.

Activist Ole Anton Hoel, on the other hand found it hard to contain his glee when the amendments to the Place-Names Act was passed in June this year:

*Finally a new law on place names has been adopted and sanctioned. To the delight and relief of many and to the chagrin of those, who can no longer harass individuals on behalf of the community's and the taxpayers' expense. [...] For decades, with name consultants from the Norwegian Mapping Agency with support from the Department of Linguistics [at University of Oslo] quietly and behind everyone's back changed place-names without information and dialogue with the owners. [...] The old law provided the basis for a number of cases, often based on a lack of expertise and unbridled arrogance, where the individual was disfavoured on the behalf and cost of the community. According to many also from an over-interpretation of the law and regulations. [...] [T]he old law created enduring and extremely strained relationships between authorities and individuals in many parts of the country and triggered a great and unnecessary resource use.<sup>7</sup> [my translation]*

How the new amendment to the Norwegian Place-Names Act will affect the Norwegian onomastic picture is too early to say. There will undoubtedly be many new spellings for smallholdings in the future, but I do not foresee a great onomastic revolution taking place over night as a result of this amendment. What we will see, is a more lenient administration of geographical names in Norway – and that will automatically minimise public complaints, and possibly also public engagement in naming issues.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hoel, Ole Anton, *Endelig ny lov om stedsnavn*, in: <http://riksmallsforbundet.no/endelig-ny-lov-om-stedsnavn>, 24. June 2015,

## Rounding off

Denmark and Norway serve as good cases for how public engagement in the naming and standardisation of geographical names. Both countries have regulations on how geographical names are spelled, albeit not with the same legislative status and might, and both have a board of decision-making experts. Public engagement in naming and standardisation of geographical names vary considerably between Denmark and Norway, though. There is an indication that where there is a greater possibility for legal enforcement, public participation is also higher. In other words, public engagement is in the form of complaints, not active positive participation. Depending on whether one sees public engagement as a whole as positive or negative, then the regulative structure of either Denmark or Norway may serve as a model. However, a more beneficiary way would be if public participation could be in the form of active, positive dialogue with geographical names authorities during the naming and standardisation process, rather than after decisions have been made. But that probably demands an entirely new awareness of the importance of geographical names than has hitherto been realised.



## Personal profile:

- **last name:** Gammeltoft
  - **first name:** Peder
  - **affiliation:** Name Research Section, Department of Nordic Research, University of Copenhagen
  - **title:** Associate Professor, Head of Name Research Section
  - **Biography:** Dr. Peder Gammeltoft has worked at the Name Research Section for 16 years, most recently as Head of the Section and on the board of the Place-Names Commission. His research interests include a broad array of topics, such as toponymy, historical linguistics, the Viking Age, historical geography and GIS. Much of his toponymic research concerns place-names of Scandinavian origin in the Viking-Age colonies in the North Atlantic, the British Isles and in Normandy – as well as place-names in general Denmark and Scandinavia. Being naturally a part of historical linguistics, toponymy has led Peder Gammeltoft into studies of contact phenomena, particularly between Scandinavia and the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic (Welsh and Gaelic) languages of the British Isles.
- Peder Gammeltoft is also interested in teaching specialist courses such as toponymy and historical linguistics at graduate level and has undertaken two PhD-courses in cooperation with University of Glasgow for Onomastic Students – one of which was specifically on the use of GIS in onomastic research.